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BY SIEGFRIED SCHWANTES *

OF TARES AND HERETICS

**A parable from the lips of Jesus has
strongly influenced the growth of religious freedom.**

It is a frosty May morning in Coire, a Protestant village in Switzerland. The year is 1570. The council summons a book-seller under suspicion of heresy.

“What is your name?” the presiding official demands gruffly.

“George Frell, Your Grace.”

“Mr. Frell, we are informed you haven’t been to church lately.”

“No, Your Grace.”

“Why not?”

“Methinks I will go hear the preacher, if he preaches according to the Word of God.”

“Mr. Frell, we understand your children have not been baptized.”

“That’s true, Your Grace.”

“You know that is a serious offense.”

(The air in the poorly lit chamber

is tense.)

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, to declare that in my opinion the baptism of children is not essential to salvation.”

The counselors gasp in dismay. But none dare to pronounce the fateful word “Anabaptist.”

“What books do you sell in your library?”

“Books that enlighten the spirit and lift the soul. Is anything wrong about selling books?”

“Wrong... well, no,” the presiding official mutters, “but we are informed you have the damned

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books of Menno Simons and Schwenkfeld.”

“Right, Your Grace. But such books can harm no one.”

The council knows its duty, but hesitates. Frell communicates such a transparent sincerity. Charged with heresy, Servetus had been burned to death in Geneva just a few years before. And in humanistic Basel, after David Joris’s identity as an Anabaptist had been established, his body had been exhumed from an aristocrat’s tomb in the church of Saint-Leonard to be burned in an autodafe.¹ But in Coire and elsewhere in Europe, consciences of Christians are smarting at punishing people and even putting them to death in the name of Jesus. Public sympathy is with Frell. The council has acted only because of the vicious attack on Frell by the local preacher, Tobi Egli. If the counsel refuses imprisonment, Egli is sure to demand banishment of the heretic.

Egli’s eloquence convinces the hesitant members of the council.

“Mr. Frell, be it known to you that since you refuse to abandon your error, this council solemnly revokes

your permit to live in Coire. You shall depart from this town by tomorrow, so that your pestilential heresy may not defile the religious honor of this most Christian community.”

Happily for Frell, another preacher in town, Jean Gantner, had imbibed the teachings of the great humanist Sebastien Castellion of the University of Basel. Gantner feels it his duty to defend Frell. The subsequent debate took a new turn in the annual synod of June 1570. Because anti-Trinitarian doctrines were being propagated by Italian refugees, the zealous Egli convinced the synod and local authorities to publish a decree demanding that inhabitants of the three counties comprising the Grisons choose between the Catholic and the Reformed faith. Should they opt for the Reformed Church, they must submit to the confession of faith of the synod of Coire and renounce every opinion tainted by Anabaptism or Arianism.

A Masterful Argument

Contrary to expectation, the decree provoked widespread protests in Coire and elsewhere. Gant-

ner courageously challenged the attack on religious freedom in his parish. On October 7, 1570, he preached a sermon based on the Parable of the Tares (Matthew 13). He developed it in a masterful way, arguing for absolute toleration of contrary religious views. To the zealous servants indignant at the presence of tares among the wheat, Gantner pointed out that the householder of the parable replied, "No [don't root up the tares], lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest" (Matt. 13:29, 30, RSV).

The impact of this sermon and others throughout the winter was enormous. Even the inquisitorial Egli, whose testimony is suspect, had to admit: "Most of the listeners deceived by a false appearance of merciful charity, began to defend the Anabaptists as true saints." To this he bitterly added that Gantner "gained so well the spirit of the simple that in town nobody dared to speak against the heretics."²

Ensuing debates were numerous, but public opinion had so changed that Egli and the synod were unable to obtain either the revocation of Gantner or expulsion of the bookseller Frell. Be it said to the honor of Egli that when the plague raged in Coire in 1574, he died rendering service to the sick and dying.

The parable of the wheat and the

weeds, so ably expounded by the resourceful Gantner, became one of the classic texts in Reformation controversies. In it the champions of religious liberty found a priceless arsenal. Its simple truths cut their way to consciences everywhere, until the principle of toleration gained recognition as one of humanity's innate rights.

Sentence of the Just Judge

John Gantner may have learned of the parable's value from the writings of Sebastien Castellion, a French humanist, who had accepted the reformed teachings. After a brief stay in Geneva, where he was principal of the City College, he moved to the more congenial Basel, where in 1553 he became professor of Greek at the university.

Earlier, while eking out a miserable existence as a proofreader, Castellion published a translation of the Bible in Latin. In the preface, dedicated to the young king of England, Edward VI, Castellion expressed for the first time his ideas concerning toleration toward heretics. He, too, found profound arguments for his thesis in the Parable of the Tares:

"Shall we be bloodthirsty and murderers because of the zeal we have for Christ, shall we root up the tares, when He, in order that the wheat be not rooted up, ordered that the tares be left till the harvest? Because of zeal

“Let us wait for the sentence of the just Judge and let us beware of condemning others. . . Let us obey the just Judge, and leave the tares until the harvest. . . The end of the world is not yet come, and we are not angels, to whom this charge is committed.”

for Christ, shall we persecute others, when He commanded that if someone smites our right cheek, we should offer to him the left?)”³

The spirit of persecution, said Castellion, is a foolish presumption on the part of man. Punishment belongs to God:

“Let us wait for the sentence of the just Judge and let us beware of condemning others. . . .Let us obey the just Judge, and leave the tares until the harvest. . . .The end of the world is not yet come, and we are not angels, to whom this charge is committed.”

Castellion’s most important book, *Concerning Heretics*, was published in Basel in 1554. Among his authorities, Castellion quoted Conrad Pellican, professor of Hebrew in Zurich, who had written a commentary on the New Testament. In his exposition of Matthew 13, Pellican had written:

“The servants who want to gather the tares before time are those who esteem that the false apostles and heretical teachers should be punished by the sword and by death. The householder does not want that

they be put to death, but he spares them in the hope they will mend and be converted from tares into wheat. If they do not mend, let them be reserved to their judge, who will punish them.”⁴

Thunderbolts Hit the Tares

Castellion’s call for religious toleration didn’t fail to draw thunderbolts from the two paragons of religious absolutism in Geneva: John Calvin and Theodore Beza. The same year, 1554, Beza composed *Concerning the Authority of the Magistrate to Punish Heretics*, published first in Latin and a few years later in French. In it he thunders:

“Beware, beware of this false charity . . . which to spare I don’t know how many wolves . . . endanger the whole flock of Jesus Christ! Know, all ye faithful magistrates. . . in order to serve God well, who put the sword in your hand to keep the honor and glory of His majesty, strike valiantly with the sword for the safety of the flock against all those monsters disguised in men.”⁵

In *Concerning Heretics*, Castellion also quotes Martin Luther’s com-

ment on the parable of the tares found in his book *Concerning the Authority of the Magistrate* (1523). From the parable, the German Reformer draws a lesson he himself forgot in the aftermath of the Peasants Revolt:

“We see by this text the great and enormous folly which we have practiced till now, constraining the Turks to embrace the faith by means of war, burning heretics and hoping to convince the Jews by fear of death and other injuries. Doing this, we want with all our might to root up the tares as if we were the ones having power over the hearts and spirits of others to make men turn to justice and goodness!”⁶

Worldly Explanations

The seminal influence of the Parable of the Tares may be attributed to Erasmus himself, the prince of humanists (1466-1536). In his polemics with the reactionary Noel Beda, syndic of the faculty of theology of Paris, and with the Spanish monks who masterminded the Inquisition, Erasmus finds no better arguments than the ones the parable furnished him.⁷

Erasmus was acquainted with the medieval commentaries on this parable. Some authorities explained that it was necessary to tolerate the tares until the Church was well established, but then they might be destroyed. St. Thomas Aquinas



believed that the tares might be rooted up if they were so distinct from the grain that there would be no mistake. Erasmus answered by saying that he didn't feel authorized to introduce into the sacred text such worldly explanations. To him, the parable's teaching indicted the Inquisition.

The parable's influence spanned the whole century of the Reformation, and certainly inclined consciences toward respect for religious convictions. But many would still suffer imprisonment or exile, when not death itself, before divine light dissipated the miasma of religious absolutism.

Tare-able Dialogues

One such victim was Bernardino Ochino, born in Sienna, Italy, in 1487. Appointed General of the Order of the Capuchins in 1538, he became known as the greatest preacher of Italy. Soon after, he adhered to the Reformation and fled to Geneva in 1542. He married the following year, and later lived in Zurich as pastor of the Protestant refugees from Locarno. There in 1563 he published his *Dialogues*, which won him the wrath of the magistrates. Without even giving him a public audience, the Senate of Zurich ordered his banishment. He appealed, but the subsequent in-



Ochino's views on religious toleration were set forth in Dialogue 28. The imaginary dialogue takes place between Pius IV, the ruling pope, and Cardinal Morone, who is supposed to defend toleration. He considers three cases of heresy in order of gravity.

quest only revealed more clearly his dogmatic errors.

In midwinter, Ochino was an expatriate. He went to Basel, but Basel refused asylum. After a stay in Germany, he tried Poland, soon to become the refuge of many Italian nonconformists. But Poland, too, closed the door. After seeing his five children die of the plague, he himself fell victim in early 1565, in the Anabaptist colony of Austerlitz in Moravia.

Ochino's views on religious toleration were set forth in Dialogue 28. The imaginary dialogue takes place between Pius IV, the ruling pope, and Cardinal Morone, who is supposed to defend toleration. He considers three cases of heresy in order of gravity. The first concerns error on a point of doctrine not essential to salvation. Such error doesn't deserve death in any way. The second case concerns the heretic who errs by imprudence on points essential to salvation. Such a man should be enlightened, not killed.

"Heresy is a spiritual thing, it

cannot be extirpated from the soul neither by scalpels, nor by swords, not even by fire, but only by the Word of God. This dissipates all the darkness of error, once it has enlightened the spirit. That's why Saint Paul says: 'The weapons of our warfare are not worldly' (2 Corinthians 10:4, RSV)."

The third case is of the heretic who knowingly denies a truth essential to salvation. He should not be burned either, since no one can read the heart.

Cardinal Morone: "What can we know about man's inner disposition?"

Pius IV: "We certainly can judge him by his dead fruits."

Cardinal Morone: "What can we know about man's inner disposition?"

Pius IV: "Blasphemy, idolatry. The law of Moses demands that such be put to death."

Cardinal Morone: "We are not obligated to follow all strictures of the laws of Moses. Many such laws pertained only to the theocracy."

Cardinal Morone, the spokesman

for Ochino, reviews all biblical texts that Castellion had so ably argued in his defense of heretics: the parable of the tares; the answer of Christ to the sons of Zebedee: "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of" (Luke 9:55, KJV); the answer of Gamaliel to the Jews: "Keep away from these men and let them alone" (Acts 5:38, RSV); Paul's answer to Titus concerning a heretic: "Have nothing more to do with him" (Titus 3:10, RSV). Concludes Morone: "May the magistrate reserve the sword for the crimes of common law."⁸

In America: A Fertile Field

But such truths echoed faintly in most 16th-century hearts. A few more heretics had to die, a few more fires had to burn to illuminate conscience. A generation later, in the New World, Roger Williams used the Parable of the Tares to make an eloquent appeal for freedom of conscience. He took the lesson of the parable beyond Castellion's application, and even beyond his contemporaries.

Whereas Williams' chief antagonist, John Cotton, the Puritan minister of New England, saw in the tares the hypocrites that one should tolerate in the church, Roger Williams saw in them the heretics and non-Christians that one should leave in peace in the world, even though they might be excluded from the church. And whereas for John Cotton "the field" in

the parable designates the church, for Roger Williams this "field" designates the world. Cotton, a partisan of church-state union, wanted hypocrites to be tolerated, but heretics he would leave to the state to punish. Roger Williams, on the contrary, advocated excommunication of hypocrites and heretics to keep the church pure, but excommunication, he held, does not touch the civil life.⁹

It was Roger William's viewpoint that triumphed in America. Still to our ears ring the words of our Lord in the Parable of the Tares: "Let both grow together until the harvest"—good and bad, saints and heretics. This masterly statement contained the seed of religious toleration, which, in the fertile soil of the New World, germinated and produced in due season the blessed harvest of religious freedom. □

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